



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

21 | 2020

Modernism and the Obscene

Kei Miller, *In Nearby Bushes*

Eric Doumerc



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/30092>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.30092

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Eric Doumerc, "Kei Miller, *In Nearby Bushes*", *Miranda* [Online], 21 | 2020, Online since 13 October 2020, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/30092> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.30092>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.



Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Kei Miller, *In Nearby Bushes*

Eric Doumerc

REFERENCES

Kei Miller, *In Nearby Bushes*. Manchester: Carcanet, 2019. ISBN: 978 1 78410 845 8. 76 pages. £9.99



- 1 Kei Miller is a Jamaican poet and novelist who is currently the Ida Beam Distinguished Visiting Professor to the University of Iowa and was awarded the Forward Prize for Best Collection for his 2014 book of poems *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*. In 2017 his novel *Augustown* won the Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature.
- 2 Miller's latest collection, *In Nearby Bushes*, was published in 2019 by Carcanet and takes its title from a phrase used in a legal context in Jamaica to refer to criminals escaping into "nearby bushes". The phrase seems to recur in many newspaper articles relating incidents leading to some violent deaths. In the context of Jamaica, the word is, of course, associated with the mountains, and with rural areas, but also with Jamaica's tormented past, as in the days of slavery, runaway slaves and Maroons escaped into the "bush", or the hills.
- 3 The collection is divided into three sections, "Here", "Sometimes I Consider the Names of Places", and "In Nearby Bushes", which look at various aspects of Jamaican history through the prism of places, placelessness, and naming.

4 The phrase "in nearby bushes" suggests something hidden, something which is not to be seen, and which should not be visible. As indicated in one of the first poems in the collections, "The Understory", Miller is concerned with Jamaica's hidden past and tormented present, and he wants to tell his readers about the hidden Jamaica tourists never really experience: "Are there stories you have heard about Jamaica? /Well here are the stories underneath" (8).

5 Jamaica's slave past is dealt with neatly with the tale of the reindeer which were brought to Jamaica for a show in 1988, and because of or *thanks to* a hurricane which devastated the island in that year, managed to escape into the hills and to put down roots, so to speak, so that their population now stands at 6,000. That story is, of course, used to deal with the issues of identity and displacement, with the reindeer, like the runaway slaves before them, having to adapt and to make Jamaica their home:

"There is such a thing as the perfect storm.
It includes an actual storm & deer
in weak cages & nearby bushes.

How wonderful to escape
Into hills that have always been escape.
They are the new maroons." (18)

6 The prose-poem entitled "Place-name: Oracabessa -" looks at the issue of naming and colonialism. Oracabessa is, of course, well-known as the place where Ian Fleming lived and wrote so many of his James Bond novels. From "Oracabessa" ("Golden Head"), the poet engages in a long meditation on Jamaica's history, the gold the Spaniards looked for in Jamaica, the gold in James Bond's golden gun, and finally the golden light reflected on a bay or on bananas which eventually inspired writers like himself to write in a new language to dismantle the language of the colonizing power:

light gilding the bay, and perhaps bananas, and
perhaps ackee, and such language as could summon wind to capsize
Columbus's ships--and if that's not gold, then what is? (34)

7 In many poems, the issue of naming comes to the fore, as in Miller's previous collection, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion*. In the poem entitled "Sometimes I Consider the Names of Places", Miller takes the example of New Zealand where the natives called a place "Otepoti" only to see that name erased by settlers who were reminded of their native Scotland and renamed it "Dunedin":

Place name--Dunedin. Old Gaelic word. "Dun" being the same
word as "fort". Fort being the same word as "burgh". Dunedin or
Fort Edin, or Edin Fort, or Edinburgh" (31)

8 As the quotation above makes it clear, Miller explores the process of "making territories out of maps" (31) and often resorts to the device of the mock dictionary entry to make his point: place names and maps are mere constructs which reflect a particular world view which was imposed on the natives by settlers and colonists.

9 In another "micro-essay" (27) with the same title, the same technique is applied to the Caribbean, and to Christopher Columbus's infamous mistake:

Sometimes I consider the names of places: The West Indies. Or said
another way: Western India

as if India was not enough" (33)

- 10 Social divisions, violent acts perpetrated against the gay community ("A Psalm for Gay Boys"), the apparent emptiness and void to be found in a post-colonial island, the constant (and very colonial) craving for foreign things and the consequent devaluation of things Jamaican, are all dealt with at various points in this collection through the prism of language. In fact, Miller encourages his readers to look at Jamaica and at its troubled history in a novel way, and to see the creative possibilities behind the apparent chaos and lawlessness. In the end, the lesson seems to be that even the nameless places are important and can be poetic.
-

INDEX

Mots-clés: poésie des Caraïbes

Keywords: Caribbean poetry

AUTHORS

ERIC DOUMERC

Maître de Conférences

Université de Toulouse-Jean Jaurès

eric.doumerc@univ-tlse2.fr.